

## FROM FIELD AND STUDY

**Distinctive feeding behaviour of Red-necked Avocet at Augusta, Western Australia** – The Red-necked Avocet (*Recurvirostris novaehollandiae*) is a tall long-legged common nomadic shorebird found in suitable wetlands throughout mainland Australia, and as a vagrant in Tasmania (Slater *et al.* 2004). Simpson and Day (2004) list preferred habitat as tidal flats, marshes, saltworks, and shallow inland salt lakes. These birds are usually found in pairs or small flocks, and feed by swinging the bill from side to side while wading, or tip-tilting while swimming (Slater *et al.* 2004). They have partly webbed feet, and are often found swimming. They are predominantly white, with a chestnut head, a long black upturned bill, a black wing bar and wing tips, and dark stripes down the side of the back, described by Simpson and Day (2004) as being “distinctive in flight”. This fits with my observations as described below.

In 2005, I was staying at Augusta in the far south-west of Western Australia, and had occasion to visit the large sand-bar at the mouth of the Blackwood River, which is adjacent to the town. I observed an unusually large flock of Red-necked Avocets feeding in the shallows near the river-mouth. Over a period of three successive days, I made estimates of the flock size on a total of more than ten occasions, and settled on

a flock size of 250 individuals, which was by far the largest flock I have ever seen in the south-west. On occasion, the flock would split into either two or three sub-flocks, which would end up in different parts of the estuary near the river mouth, at a distance from each other of no more than about 200 metres. I observed a very striking phenomenon, when, on four occasions over a three day period, I saw one of the sub-flocks take to the air from where they were foraging, and begin to fly up and down above their feeding site. Immediately this occurred, the other sub-flock or sub-flocks would lift up from where they were foraging, and fly swiftly to where the group was lifting up and down, and the entire group would then settle down to feed. As Simpson and Day (2004) have stated, the birds in flight were very distinctive, and to me the different markings on the body and wings as the birds moved up and down created a spectacular “flashing” effect, which could easily be seen from quite a distance away. It seems as if this behaviour provided a signal to the others that there was good foraging at that site. Certainly, the immediate response of the other group/s as described above would imply that this might be so. This was the only period during which I have observed this type of behaviour, and I have not come across any reference to this in the literature.

## REFERENCES

SIMPSON, K. and DAY, N. 2004. *Field Guide to the Birds of Australia* 7<sup>th</sup> Edition. Penguin Group, Australia.

SLATER, P., SLATER, P. and SLATER, R. 2004. *The Slater Field Guide to Australian Birds*. Reed New Holland.

– JOSEPH FROUDIST, 17 Tabard St., Greenwood, Western Australia

**Winter activity in the Dugite, *Pseudonaja affinis*** – Of the two most commonly encountered large venomous snakes in the Perth metropolitan area, the Dugite *Pseudonaja affinis* and the Tiger Snake *Notechis scutatus*, it is generally accepted that Tiger Snakes are cold tolerant and may be active during winter, whereas Dugites prefer warmer conditions and remain inactive throughout the colder months (Softly and Cockett 1967; Storr 1988; Bush *et al.* 2007). However, on 21 June 2009 at about 1.15pm I observed a large (>1m total length) adult Dugite basking in Star Swamp Bushland Reserve (31°51'S, 115°46'E).

The Dugite was coiled at the base of a *Xanthorrhoea preissii*, located immediately adjacent to a limestone track in an area of Tuart open woodland. Its coils were arranged laterally but resting on the side of the *Xanthorrhoea* trunk and therefore perpendicular to the ground – presumably the better to absorb heat from the low, weak sunlight.

Although I could not see the Dugite's head, it was obviously aware of me as it began to disappear a few seconds after I stopped to observe it. It took refuge amongst the surrounding tangle of vegetation and the low, dense skirt of the *Xanthorrhoea*: indeed, although I could not see for certain, I gained the impression it may have moved up into the *Xanthorrhoea* skirt. While not as quick to escape as a Dugite disturbed during the warmer months, it was nevertheless quite sure in its movements and had disappeared from sight after several seconds. Although the day was cool and cloudy with occasional patches of sunshine, the Dugite's dorsal colouration, a dark monotone brown, would have helped it to absorb heat. The temperature range for the day was 7–16°C (Bureau of Meteorology).

## REFERENCES

BUSH, B., MARYAN, B., BROWNE-COOPER, R. and ROBINSON, D. 2007. *Reptiles and frogs in the bush: southwestern Australia*. University of Western Australia Press, Crawley.

SOFTLY, A. and COCKETT, E.G. 1967. The overwintering of some captive indigenous reptiles in Perth. *Western Australian Naturalist* 10:100.

STORR, G.M. 1988. *Dangerous snakes of Western Australia* (rev. ed.). Western Australian Museum, Perth.

– PAUL ORANGE, 18 Balfern Court, Hamersley, WA 6022